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## Of Truth and Terror

*Diego Gambetta, Nuffield College, Oxford*

### DRAFT NOT FOR CIRCULATION

“Who, on September 10, was expecting by Christmastime to be reading unscandalised editorials in the Herald Tribune about the pros and cons of using torture on captured ‘enemy combatants’? Who expected Britain to renounce the doctrine of nuclear no-first-use?” “Terrorism – Martin Amis concluded – undermines morality” (The Guardian, 4 March, 2003). An equally worrying casualty of the response to 9/11 has been trust. Trust in the truthfulness of information – circulating between and within governments, democratic institutions, intelligence services, media and the public – has been seriously dented on both sides of the Atlantic. The *first casualty* of “the war on terror” seems like that of any other war, only worse.

Much of the breakdown of trust is due to what appear to be deliberate misrepresentations and exaggerations by both the US and UK governments, especially in connection with the war on Iraq. A long series of oddly clumsy cases has been quickly and publicly exposed.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, I deal mostly with some of the mechanisms that, under a terrorist threat, can generate untruths over and above the actors’ intentions to deceive. I am more concerned with cognitive biases and bad information than with bad character. In the first part of this paper I focus on the momentous mindset shift that the 9/11 attack caused and on its rationality. In the second part, I deal with some of the ways in which the main players, especially the intelligence services, may incur into cognitive mistakes when collecting or evaluating the evidence about the terrorist threat. (Those running out of time or patience with this long paper can read each part independently.)

The implications impinge not just on the solidity of our democracies, which rely on truth being transmitted among its constituent members to function properly. They are relevant also for our ability to fight terrorism and minimise the extent to which the threat can affect our lives and liberties.

Avishai Margalit pointed out that: “Terror as propaganda-by-action counts on one thing: the overreaction of its victims. Out of anger and frustration the victims will respond by punishing bystanders, who will react by becoming more radical in their feelings and more susceptible to recruitment. Fighting terror is a delicate matter, and there is little sign that it has been understood in Washington” (The New York Review of Books, March 13, 2003). Here I will present further insidious elements of the response, which can cause terrorists to succeed or fail. Not only how the threat is fought against, but also the

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<sup>1</sup>For a full account see John B. Judis and Spencer Ackerman. “The First Casualty”, *The New Republic*, June 30, 2003. See also Glen Rangwala <http://reselect.org.uk/deccit.html> for British examples.

manners in which it is framed, described, or infiltrated, and the information about it constructed and diffused, are riddled with pitfalls. Moreover, the way in which the threat is assessed directly affects our civil liberties: the bigger and nastier this is portrayed to be the harsher are the infringements to our civil liberties that can be justified and accepted. One way to defend them is therefore to identify all the forces that could unintentionally exaggerate it.

9/11 has profoundly rearranged economic and political interests. It hit the western economies in many ways, while at the same time creating new opportunities for some industries, such as security, weapon, and media, all of which stand to sell more of their goods the greater the threat is. No doubt economic forces are lobbying for the pursuit of certain strategies which best suit their interests, and manipulatively peddling the beliefs that can bring those about. Some of these interests sit uncomfortably close to the present US Administration top echelons, making the day of those inclined to conspiracy thinking.<sup>2</sup>

On the front of raw politics too commentators from many quarters have speculated about the self-serving political interest that would inspire ‘the war on terror’, and promote its manipulative use. Stanley Hoffman, for instance, wrote:

Indeed, a technique that the administration has used brilliantly is the manipulation of fear. Americans have been “shocked and awed” by September 11, and the President has found in this criminal act not just a rationale, hitherto missing, for his administration, but a lever he could use to increase his, and his country’s, power. All that was needed was, first, to proclaim that we were at war (something other societies attacked by terrorists have not done), second, to extend that war to states sheltering or aiding terrorist groups, and third, to allege connections between Islamist terrorists and “rogue states,” such as Iraq and Iran, engaged in efforts to obtain or build weapons of mass terror (New York Review of Books, June 12, 2003).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The unholy mix between views on anti-terrorist policy and private interests is epitomised by the troubling case of Richard Perle: “There is no question that Perle believes that removing Saddam from power is the right thing to do. At the same time, he has set up a company that may gain from a war”. Seymour Hersh, “Lunch with the chairman. Why was Richard Perle meeting with Adnan Khashoggi?” *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the overtly stated reasons to wage war on Iraq (Sever the WMD-Al Qaeda link, Destroy an evil regime and liberate Iraqis, Bring democracy to the Middle-East, Increase the chances of peace in the Middle East) and from the down to earth alleged economic motives (Get the Iraqi oil, Get lucrative contracts for friends in many industries), those prone to conspiratorial thinking have had a field day. Here are some interpretations I collected, though am sure this is not an exhaustive list.

- Avenge 9/11
- Finish the job Bush senior left incomplete
- Retaliate, show the world no one can mess with us
- Do the work for Israel
- Get the troops out of Saudi Arabia (and unobtrusively give in to Bin Laden’s demand)
- Get a base in the Middle east from which to attack Syria and Iran
- Imperialism: “Behind the whole push to go to war with Iraq is the desire to have a huge military presence in the Near East as a *stepping stone to taking over the rest of the world.*” (Norman Mailer, *The New York Review of Books*, March 27, 2003)
- Psychic rejuvenation (“We could say we went to war because we very much *needed a successful war as a species of psychic rejuvenation.* Any major excuse would do—nuclear threat, terrorist nests, weapons of mass destruction —we could always make the final claim that we were liberating the Iraqis. Who could

All this makes “the war on terror” sound as a deliberate ploy, an affair nurtured exclusively in the most fiendishly rational part of policy makers’ brains. Although I cannot recall another case in which the healthy resistance against resorting to conspiracy theories has been put so severely to the test, I would still resist it. Resist it in the minimal sense that I believe that the cognitive and emotional effects of 9/11, and the unintended consequences that follow from them, are arguably as important as the various mundane economic and political interests that were unleashed by it. At least they are worthy of examination over and above whatever conspiracy pet theory we may entertain.

*What to compare 9/11 with?*

The 9/11 attack is unprecedented because of the means, the scale of its destructive effects, the number of non-combatant victims it caused and the locations where it took place. Like Pearl Harbour it was devastating, unexpected and the work of foreigners, but unlike Pearl Harbour it was not perpetrated by one army against another but by 19 young men armed with very little at the expense of civilians.

In terms of the psychological effects it induced and the response strategies that followed we may compare 9/11 with what other terrorist acts have caused in the past and in other countries. The usefulness of this exercise, however, would derive largely from finding differences rather than similarities, as no other country has responded as the US has, not even the Japanese after the sarin attack, which is so far the only terrorist act to use a WMD. To find similarities the consequences of 9/11 are perhaps best compared with those caused by both other devastating surprise attacks and by other grand and elusive threats. The ‘anarchists’, the ‘communists’ and the mafia, and the obsessions that went with them, have something in common with the threat made salient by 9/11. We lack a clear antidote; the perpetrators’ worldview is dramatically different from ours; they are prepared to pay heavy personal costs; they seem bent on destroying civilisation as we know it; and are seen as having a global reach. And although we know what 19 young men with box cutters can do, there remains much uncertainty about how large and serious the threat really is.

*A distinction*

When considering whether and how the truth about a state of affairs that is not easily observable can circulate we should consider a fundamental distinction. The truth may be known to some and not to others, this is *the asymmetric case*. The terrorists (should) know what they want, what their plans are and what weapons they can count on, while their targets do not. The governments may know more about the terrorists than they publicly reveal, and the secret services may know more than both. How much truth they disclose to each other, and by which means, are subject to the players’ strategic considerations.

There is also the case, however, in which the overall truth about a state of affairs is not clearly known by anyone, let us call this *the inscrutable case*. The inscrutable case emerges

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argue with that? (Norman Mailer offering a different view, *The New York Review of Books*, July 17, 2003, *The White Man Unburdened*)

- Satisfy Frustrated Machismo (“Bush knew that a big victory in an easy war would work for the good white American male. (...) Moreover, we had knockout tank echelons, Super-Marines, and—one magical ace in the hole—the best air force that ever existed. If we could not find our machismo anywhere else, we could certainly count on the interface between combat and technology. Let me then advance the offensive suggestion that this may have been one of the covert but real reasons we went looking for war. *We knew we were likely to be good at it.*” Norman Mailer in the same *New York Review of Books* article offering yet a different explanation.)

when information cannot travel well within the enemy camp because of secrecy requirements. A situation such as this arose at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the anarchists and is now back with Al Qaeda. There are also parallels with the mafia, which for a long time was a threat hard to identify, quantify, and classify. If communications between terrorists are constrained, and their organisation is fragmented, each terrorist cell knows only what they do. Yet, they may find it hard to know how many other cells there are and what exactly they are up to, whether they are genuine or not, how large and determined they are, whether they are the authors of a certain attack. Some Al Qaeda inspired terrorists may not even know whether Bin Laden is alive, rather than simply being kept fraudulently alive. As in Akira Kurosawa's film *Kagemusha*, his close associates may want to make others believe that he is still alive or any kind of rabble rousing agent may wish to inject yet more terror by resuscitating Bin Laden and riding on his repute. Even in the best scenario the secret services cannot know the full picture for there isn't one to know. This is one reason why the evidence on terrorism is, in the words of Paul Wolfowitz, "murky". Our understanding of communication in the asymmetric case is quite advanced, especially thanks to the economics of information, but we have no clear theory or theories of how 'truths' are created in the inscrutable case. We need to think hard about this, especially about the effect that publicly transmitted interpretations of the threat have in shaping the reality they pretend to know.

## I

### Through the prism of 9/11

When something of the calibre of 9/11 happens, low probability events suddenly appear on people's radar and stay there – they become *salient*. People worry about new attacks, revising upward, often unduly, the probability that they may occur again or that they may be the victims of them. When the sniper in Virginia struck people were terrified by that even though, as the rationally inclined observers kept pointing out, their chances of dying in a car accident were much greater than being shot by the sniper. "A New York Times poll of 976 adult New Yorkers, taken last week, underscores how much lasting damage 9/11 inflicted on the city's psyche. Two-thirds of the people questioned said they were very concerned about another attack in New York, slightly more than felt that way a year ago. In their routine moments, New Yorkers indicated, they are thinking and talking less often about the terrorist attack than they were a year ago, but the subtext of discomfort is every bit as intense" (The New York Times, September 8, 2003.)<sup>4</sup> People also worry about other kinds of massive attacks as the discontinuity in scale of 9/11 with respect to previous terrorist acts inclines us to think that if that is possible then anything is.

The way in which the threat of terrorist attacks was re-framed changed in more specific ways in the minds of policy makers, who never before in recent US history – as Stephen Holmes reminded me – came so close to becoming themselves the victims of terrorism.

As many commentators have pointed out, the first framing response was to see the US at war, and define the response as *the war on terror*. It is unclear whether the "war" was thought originally as an effective metaphor or was the result of "the fallacy of the instrument", namely to use the instrument you know how to use just because it is the

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<sup>4</sup> See also the September 2003 survey by the Pew Research Center, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=>

only instrument you know how to use” (Avishai Margalit, *The New York Review of Books*, March 13, 2003). Whatever the case, it came to have some constraining force. “The phrase (...) framed the way people think about how the United States is reacting to the September 11th attacks so completely, that the idea that declaring and waging war on terror was not the sole, inevitable, logical consequence of the attacks just isn't in circulation.”<sup>5</sup> Two further features were attached to that of a war: “The war against terrorists of global reach is a *global* enterprise of *uncertain duration*”

Another belief held by the US administration is not only that 9/11 in itself is unprecedented, which it is, but also that the further threats it heralded is, which is not so clear. Interviewed by Larry King Rumsfeld said: “*the dangers we face are different than any time in the history of the world.* With the power of those weapons and the nexus between weapons of mass destruction and terrorist states and terrorist networks is just a volatile, dangerous combination.”

Not only is the threat unprecedented, but also “elusive”. It is worth quoting Donald Rumsfeld at length with regard to this feature of the threat, as his words sharply elucidate the dramatic mindset shift that followed 9/11. A journalist asked him: “Regarding terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, you said something to the effect that the real situation is worse than the facts show. I wonder if you could tell us what is worse than is generally understood.” Rumsfeld replied:

All of us in this business read intelligence information. And we read it daily and we think about it and it becomes, in our minds, essentially what exists. And that's wrong. It is not what exists. I say that because I have had experiences where I have gone back and done a great deal of work and analysis on intelligence information and looked at important countries, target countries, looked at important subject matters with respect to those target countries and asked, probed deeper and deeper and kept probing until I found out what it is we knew, and when we learned it, and when it actually had existed. And I found that (...) anytime you look at it that way what you find is that there are very important pieces of intelligence information that countries, that spend a lot of money, and a lot of time with a lot of wonderful people trying to learn more about what's going on in the world, did not know some significant event for two years after it happened, for four years after it happened, for six years after it happened, in some cases 11 and 12 and 13 years after it happened. Now what is the message there? *The message is: there are known "knowns."* *There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns.* And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns. It sounds like a riddle. It isn't a riddle. It is a very serious, important matter. There's another way to phrase that and that is that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It is basically saying the same thing in a different way. *Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist.* And yet almost always, when we make our threat assessments,

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002.

when we look at the world, we end up basing it on the first two pieces of that puzzle, rather than all three.<sup>6</sup>

The appreciation of the threat as unprecedented, very large and elusive, has contributed to inspire the doctrine of pre-emptive war:

*The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction — and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively. The United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats, nor should nations use preemption as a pretext for aggression. Yet in an age where the enemies of civilization openly and actively seek the world's most destructive technologies, the United States cannot remain idle while dangers gather.*<sup>7</sup>

The stress on the risks of inaction and the doctrine of pre-emptive attacks by definition implies that wars can be waged with no clear *casus belli*. A threat does not need to be proved as true or even imminent to justify a war.

This strategic choice puts a strong pressure on the intelligence services to come up with high quality information to sustain that strategy and make it as little controversial as possible. It also puts an enormous pressure on the trust that the public has in their leaders (and the rest of the world has in the US administration). The doctrine inevitably raises doubts about trustworthiness both in the sense of making one wonder whether there is sufficient solid evidence to warrant a war and whether the true reason why a pre-emptive action is chosen is the reason being publicly claimed. By embracing the pre-emptive war strategy the standards of truth that normally guide our actions in a democracy are lowered and the uncertainty we have over the real plans, connections and strength of the terrorists is transformed in uncertainty over the legitimacy and rationality of the response.

This new approach and the strategic choices that go with it are an understandable response to the trauma of 9/11. But how balanced and conducive to rationality they are is an open question. Once we put all the ingredients together “the suspicion remains that America is not behaving rationally - that America is behaving like someone still in shock”<sup>8</sup>: you believe that (i) you are at war, a war of global scope and uncertain duration, (ii) against an enemy you sort of know but also against unknown unknowns, that (iii) in any case the dangers are unprecedented and that (iv) inaction is risky and pre-emptive attacks justified. What kind of cocktail is this, and what effects is it going to have on the quality of one's decisions? For instance, the idea that we are up against unknown unknowns, is trivial if taken literally and limp as a guide to action as it does not single out any course of action. And if it is taken as a guide for action it becomes dangerously erratic. I cannot think of anyone else in history who ran around at once armed and

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<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, Press Conference at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium, June 6, 2002, US Department of Defense transcript, my emphasis. It can be found at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/docs/0206/doc04.htm>. Rumsfeld was quoting from an axiom – “There are knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns.” – whose author is also, aptly, unknown; see an article by George Will, [www.oakridger.com/stories/010201/opE\\_0102010041.html](http://www.oakridger.com/stories/010201/opE_0102010041.html).

<sup>7</sup> National Security Strategy Document, White House website, September 2002, my emphasis, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>

<sup>8</sup> Martin Amis, *The Guardian*, March 4, 2003.

imbued with such a concoction, which seem truly unprecedented. May be only Don Quixote comes close to having nursed that mindset. Was Iraq a windmill then?

### **From guesswork to set beliefs**

Burdened by the belief that we are dealing with unknown unknowns we respond by trying to gather more and better intelligence, and I will discuss the problems of this below. But we also respond faster by guesswork, which is all the more likely to go into overdrive the greater the fear and more serious the possible consequences of a mistake. We try to imagine just what these unknowns might be. This includes searching for the rationale of possible enemy's actions based on some theory of human behaviour. Two models of this sort have been for instance the following:

'Saddam's Iraq and Al Qaeda have overlapping interests, hence sooner or later they will join forces'

'Saddam does not cooperate with the UN inspectors, hence he must be hiding WMD'.

Both are surely possible, and the latter is a common enough inference with which we try to detect liars. Yet, they were treated not so much as hypotheses that needed evidence or needed to be set against alternative hypotheses.<sup>9</sup> What we can surmise, bearing in mind that we may be the victims of propaganda, indicates that they were rigidly embraced. There was a peculiar lack of doubt in the political leadership of the coalition forces with regard to waging war on Iraq. The dearth of evidence to back their choice up and the alternative reasoning one could plausibly construct – for instance that a war would increase the spread of WMDs rather than decreases it or that Saddam was bluffing – could make us think that the real motives that yielded that unflinching confidence cannot possibly be those which were publicly invoked, for these were too weak.

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<sup>9</sup> As for the former 'axiom', the possibility that the ideologies of the Bhaatists and of Al Qaeda make them most unlikely bedfellows faded into the background. There was a history of conflict between these two parties, which intersected with the conflict with Iran. After all, "the first major contemporary suicide terrorist attack in the Middle East was the December 1981 destruction of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut (27 dead, over 100 wounded)", and not as often reported the attack on the American and French bases there which occurred two years later. Yet, the mere possibility that they might join forces made the Administration to act as if they already did. This interpretation, as several commentators have pointed out, might be 'creative', and give the Iraqi regime or now its remnants an incentive to consider joining forces with the terrorists. And in communicative persuasion the difference between the real and the merely possible was obliterated. Most American were persuaded by the Administration that this was indeed already the case, or even that Iraq was connected with 9/11, even though no hard evidence of that has hitherto emerged and countless anonymous sources from the intelligence services have complained about this. As for the latter inference, the thought that Saddam might have an interest to persuade his foes in the region that he did have WMD even if he did not even surface. He may have been deceiving, but not those we assumed he was. He might have chosen to bluff, mimicking what someone who truly has WMD does, i.e. refuse to cooperate with the UN inspections. Or, more loosely, he might have done so because he wanted to show that he was tough and not easy to bend to the will of the West. Chief U.N. inspector Hans Blix told BBC radio possible explanations for the lack of cooperation included the pride of the Iraqis and the megalomania of their leader. "*I think that Saddam probably figured himself as emperor of Mesopotamia and they regarded all inspections as intrusions.*" (Reuters, U.N. Nuclear Experts in Iraq to Check on Looting, June 6, 2003). Even disregarding the fact that WMD are still to be found, circumstantial evidence that Saddam was bluffing comes from source. Hans Blix reported to the Security Council on 7 March 2003: "the numerous initiatives, which are now taken by the Iraqi side with a view to resolving some long-standing open disarmament issues, can be seen as 'active', or even 'proactive'". (Glen Rangwala, <http://reselect.org.uk/deceit.html>), which suggests that as an invasion looked more likely they dropped the bluff, albeit to no avail.

Political leaders and statesmen – Norman Mailer wrote – are serious men even when they appear to be fools, and it is rare to find them acting without some deeper reason they can offer to themselves. It is those covert motives in the Bush administration upon which I would like to speculate here. I will attempt to understand what the President and his inner cohort see as the logic of their present venture (The New York Review of Books, March 27, 2003).

They are not fools, but neither are they a lot smarter or cognitively and emotionally different from the rest of us. In the face of high uncertainty and deep fear of unknown unknowns there is a genuine tendency to reduce complexity by guesswork. Evidence is slow to come by and it may always be inconclusive.

The trouble with guesswork however is that it is a magnet for doubts and yet more guesswork, a recipe for inaction. But this clashes with the other belief, namely that the risks of inaction are very high. If action is to be taken guesswork must gel into set beliefs, and these beliefs must be firmly embraced. The weaker or more ambiguous the evidence in support of one's beliefs the higher the cognitive dissonance and the tighter the embrace required to overcome it. If the evidence is not clear enough, or if there is a large amount of inconclusive evidence backing *any* view up as it is often the case with intelligence reports, forget about the evidence.

Recently Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld admitted just that much when he told

the Senate Armed Services Committee that the administration decided to use military force in Iraq because the information about the threat of Saddam's regime was seen with a different perspective after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. "The coalition did not act in Iraq because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass murder," Rumsfeld said. "We acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light *through the prism of our experience on Sept. 11*" (Associated Press, July 9, 2003).

Paul Wolfowitz, the US deputy defence secretary, has also been disarmingly candid in this regard: "The nature of terrorism is that intelligence about terrorism is murky." "I think the lesson of 9/11 is that if you're not prepared to act on the basis of murky intelligence, you're going to have to act after the fact, and after the fact now means after horrendous things have happened to this country" (The Daily Telegraph, July 28, 2003).<sup>10</sup>

"A common reaction to traumatic surprise is the recommendation to cope with ambiguity and ambivalence by acting on the most threatening possible interpretations. If there is *any* evidence of threat, assume it is valid, even if the apparent weight of the contrary indicators is greater."<sup>11</sup> Yet, we can question the rationality of this perspective, on the grounds that it is both practically hard to sustain and may lead to worse unintended consequences than the "murky" reality it is purportedly fighting against.

### *Attracting bad reasons*

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<sup>10</sup> That evidence and intelligence were not really an issue is also shown by the fact that the Bush administration decided to go to war on Iraq in the late fall of 2001, just weeks after 9/11 (The New Republic, "The First Casualty" by John B. Judis & Spencer Ackerman, June 30, 2003).

<sup>11</sup>Richard K.Betts, 1978, "Analysis, war and decision: why intelligence failures are inevitable", World Politics, 31, 1, 61-89, p.73.

If one is to respond to *any* evidence of threat, one is likely to find oneself with lots of options. As Buridan's ass, one wonders whether to fight against A or B, or C. There is nothing in the recommendation to treat any evidence of threat as valid that can help one choose among alternatives. The choice remains indeterminate. If there are equally weak reasons to follow different strategies, additional reasons must be found to push the decision one way or the other. Such conundrums attract those who for whatever reason nurture strong views on the value of doing X rather than Y: religious beliefs, ideologies, expatriates, devotees of Leo Strauss, economic or political lobbies, Likud's supporters and what not. If conspiracies had an effect on deciding the war on Iraq this was because the new 'strategic' mindset was liable to be so manipulated.

#### *Group Think*

A further effect – produced when evidence is inconclusive, there are multiple courses of action as well as pressure to act – is that the believers in doing X or Y tend to develop a sectarian mentality and congregate with like-minded individuals. Creating new institutions, and selecting their members on the basis of an agenda, is one way in which that process can occur.

Mr. Rumsfeld genuinely felt that the C.I.A. and D.I.A. were doing a horrendous job on Iraq — after all, he was hearing much more alarming information from those close to Ahmad Chalabi. So the Pentagon set up its own intelligence unit, and it sifted through everyone else's information and goaded other agencies to come up with more alarmist conclusions (The New York Times, June 6, 2003).

This exposes believers to the perils of *group-think* effects,<sup>12</sup> one feature of which is *incestuous amplification*, which is defined as “a condition in warfare where one only listens to those who are already in lock-step agreement, reinforcing set beliefs and creating a situation ripe for miscalculation”.<sup>13</sup> Among the symptoms of group-think there are: “collective rationalisation: members discredit and explain away warning contrary to group thinking” and “pressure for conformity: members pressure any in the group who express arguments against the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, viewing such opposition as disloyalty”. Civil liberties suffer for persuasion by rational argument and genuine evidence is unfeasible and the fight over what to do turns nasty. Critics are belittled as unpatriotic voices to be silenced.

#### *Biased reading of evidence*

People with set beliefs tend to shape the evidence to suit their views. Wishful thinking and wishful reading of evidence have not been just ruses to win over public opinion, they were of an incompetence too staggering to be just that. The infamous case of the Niger uranium, the mistaking of an anti-hijackers training camp as a hijackers training camp, the beliefs that two mobile trailers were set up for making WMD, are all cases in point. Not only did Colin Powell in his speech to the UN on 5 February 2002 praise a document by the British government which turned out to be almost entirely pirated from a 12-year-old analysis by a Californian graduate student and from published material in Jane's Intelligence Review. He also used the arrests of 16 North African men in Spain as an example of the links between Bin Laden and Baghdad. These men have now been

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<sup>12</sup> The interesting theory of group-think, developed by Janis, I. L. & Mann, L. (1977). *Decision making: A psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment*. New York: Free Press, has been applied to explain several decisions in recent US political history.

<sup>13</sup> Jane's Defense Weekly, cited by Paul Krugman in The New York Times, March 28, 2003.

released and are suing the Spanish Prime Minister for slander (The Guardian, September 13, 2003).

An eager desire to believe in exiles was also apparent. On a small scale, this is epitomised by the ‘professional rapist’ case. A box headlined “A Professional Rapist”, was found among 18 tonnes of Iraqi state documents captured from the central security headquarters building of Suleymaniye, in northern Iraq. It was interpreted in two documents released by the British and the US authorities<sup>14</sup> as referring to someone in the employment of the Iraqi government whose task it was “to violate women’s honour”, as a form of punishment and torture. Yet, “rather than employing Aziz as a rapist, the Iraqi authorities were suspecting him of rape”, says Mouin Rabbani, a Middle East analyst in Amman. Peter Bouckaert, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, said it was “clear (Aziz) was not employed as a ‘professional rapist’ but rather that he was suspected of illegal activity”. He claimed that the case study was based on an “absolutely incorrect reading. It’s a mistranslation.”<sup>15</sup>

The readiness to believe in exiles led, for instance, to the belief that the Iraqis would welcome the US as liberators, which in turn led to an underestimation of the cost of reconstruction and postwar difficulties.<sup>16</sup> No heed was paid to Machiavelli’s warning, which could not be clearer:

It ought to be considered how vain are the faith and promises of those who find themselves deprived of their country. For, as to their faith, it has to be borne in mind that anytime they can return to their country by other means than yours, they will leave you and look to the other, notwithstanding whatever promises they had made you. As to their vain hopes and promises, such is the extreme desire in them to return home, that *they naturally believe many things that are false and add many others by art, so that between those they believe and those they say they believe, they fill you with hope, so that relying on them you will incur expenses in vain, or you undertake an enterprise in which you ruin yourself.* (...) A Prince, therefore, ought to go slowly in undertaking an enterprise upon the representations of an exile, for most of the times he will be left either with shame or very grave injury (*Discourses*, XXXI, Book II, my emphasis).

While no doubt some of the evidence for war was “sexed up” for public consumption, it does seem as if there was a genuine if inept fervour to believe in at least some of it. That

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<sup>14</sup> A report on Iraq's human rights abuses, published by the Foreign Office in December 2002 and a US State Department briefing - Iraq: A Population Silenced – also released at the end of last year.

<sup>15</sup> I reconstructed this story from the Financial Times, February 13, 2003. Also Amnesty International concurred with Human Rights Watch and said it had received reports of male and female rape in prison from Iraqi torture victims it had interviewed but said it had not come across allegations that Iraq used professional rapists. The case is sourced in a dossier of the Iraq Research and Documentation Project at Harvard University. The project is headed by Kanan Makiya, a Baghdad-born academic and dissident. For the “evidence” see <http://fas-www.harvard.edu/~irdp/>

<sup>16</sup> “It was Chalabi who encouraged the US planners of the war to believe that the Shiites in the south would welcome the US forces as liberators (despite the fact that the US had betrayed them in 1991), that the Iraqi army would lack the will to fight, and that there would be substantial defections by the Republican Guard. This advice led Cheney to say on Meet the Press, “I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators.... I think the regular army will not [fight, and that] significant elements of the Republican Guard are likely as well to want to avoid conflict”; and it led Kenneth Adelman to predict that defeating Saddam Hussein's regime would be a “cakewalk.” The overconfidence of US officials was the result not only of Chalabi's “information” but also of their and Chalabi's eagerness to sell the war” (Elizabeth Drew, New York Review of Books, June 13, 2003).

evidence has been shaping actions and inspiring too glaring miscalculations to be just the fruit of manipulations designed to sell the war.

That there is something not quite rational is shown also by the fact that while scant evidence on the one side was taken as enough evidence to wage war, a lot of evidence of serious troubles which the war could cause was ignored. “The Bush administration seems to have gotten mixed intelligence about how the Iraqis would respond to an invasion, and the fact that the Pentagon chose to believe the optimistic reports was probably a function of political preconceptions rather than hardheaded judgments” (The New York Times, April 2, 2003). Another symptoms of group think is the “illusion of invulnerability: members ignore obvious danger, take extreme risk, and are overly optimistic”. The choice of waging war on Iraq seems to have been driven by backward looking reasons, filtered through the prism of 9/11, rather than by forward looking calculations. Would anyone in his right mind have gone to war unilaterally on Iraq before 9/11? Why its occurrence should be the reason for doing so has never been clearly explained.

A certain amount of cant can still be heard today. Vice President Dick Cheney, appearing on the NBC News program “Meet the Press” on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2003, said: “whatever the cost [of the Iraq war] is, in terms of casualties or financial resources, it's a whale of a lot less than trying to recover from the next attack in the United States” (The New York Times, September 15, 2003).<sup>17</sup> Yet, there is no evidence to believe that the two had anything to do with one another. Not only it is untrue, but arguably the opposite of the truth, in that tackling Iraq could make another attack *more* rather than less likely.

One can speculate endlessly on the “real” motives of the war. We are getting some new ones every other week, the latest being that attracting terrorists to Iraq was really a cunning ploy to fight them outside the US rather than inside them.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the dramatic lowering of truth standards implied by the pre-emptive war doctrine, which seem to have incarnated in the war on Iraq, is now having such large negative consequences, some calculable and some incalculable, that the impression remains that these alleged motives to go to war are just rationalisations. Consider, for instance, the effect on the US standing in the world both with other governments and public opinion. “In interviews by Times correspondents from Africa to Europe to Southeast Asia, one point emerged clearly: The war in Iraq has had a major impact on public opinion, which has moved generally from post-9/11 sympathy to post-Iraq antipathy, or at least to disappointment over what is seen as the sole superpower's inclination to act pre-emptively, without either persuasive reasons or United Nations approval” (The New York Times, September 11, 2003).<sup>19</sup> Who could rationally set out to cause such an outcome?

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<sup>17</sup> This was so extreme that both Bush and Rumsfeld themselves had to correct the vice-President. 2. Remarks by the President After Meeting with Members of the Congressional Conference Committee on Energy Legislation, 9/17/03, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030917-7.html>; and Defense Department News Briefing, Secretary Rumsfeld and General Pace, 9/16/03, <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2003/tr20030916-secdef0682.html>

<sup>18</sup> Cheney in Meet the Press said: “So what we do on the ground in Iraq, our capabilities here are being tested in no small measure, but this is the place where we want to take on the terrorists. This is the place where we want to take on those elements that have come against the United States, and it's far more appropriate for us to do it there and far better for us to do it there than it is here at home” (The New York Times, September 15, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> See also the May 2003 survey by the the Pew Research Center, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175>

As Maureen Dowd wrote:

I've actually gotten to the point where I hope Dick Cheney is embroiled in a Clancyesque conspiracy to benefit Halliburton. Because if it's not a conspiracy, it's naïveté and ideology. And that means our leaders have used goofball logic and lousy assumptions to trap the country in a cockeyed replay of the Crusades that could drain our treasury and strain our military for generations, without making us any safer from terrorists and maybe putting us more at risk (The New York Times, September 11, 2003).

One may now wish it were a conspiracy. Yet the evidence points towards an irrational hard-boiled “realism”, partly due to the shock of 9/11 and partly to the peculiar make-up of the present US administration. Whether or not Arnie will make it as the next governor of California, his celluloid wisdom rules: “Shoot first, think later”.<sup>20</sup>

### Unite and rule?

The same not quite so rational mindset seems to have shaped also the view of the “enemy”:

The United States of America is fighting a war against terrorists of global reach. The enemy is not a single political regime or person or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism — premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents. (...) The struggle against global terrorism is different from any other war in our history. It will be fought on many fronts against a particularly elusive enemy over an extended period of time. Progress will come through the persistent accumulation of successes—some seen, some unseen.<sup>21</sup>

This description of the enemy refers to both a unified and global entity, hypostatized into an abstract generic noun, *terrorism*. Although it is not mentioned in that document, this entity has come to be embodied in a brandname that stands to terrorism as MacDonalD to hamburgers and Cosa Nostra to organised crime: *Al Qaeda*.

Is this portrait accurate? Eric Margolis, the respected foreign correspondent of the Toronto Sun and one of the few ‘minimizer’ around, wrote: “one would imagine al Qaida to be a vast, octopoid organization whose tentacles span five continents. But this view, heavily promoted by the Bush administration (...) is wrong” The choice of ‘octopoid’ is an apt parallel with mafia, which was also known as the Octopus. According to Margolis, as well as several other cautious observers,<sup>22</sup> the picture is much more fragmented and

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<sup>20</sup> This would not explain the British choice to go to war. They were not as traumatised as the Americans were by 9/11 and the Blair government does not bear many similarities with the neo-con mentality. For the British the choice was starker. Once the Americans informed them that they were going to war come what may early in 2002, the choice for them was one of calculating the cost and benefit of going along with them relative to the cost and benefit of not doing so. Once Blair decided to choose the former option the die was cast. The rest was spin

<sup>21</sup> National Security Strategy Document, White House website, September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “The size of Al-Qaida is unclear. The group itself has been reported to have several hundred to several thousand members. Al-Qaida also serves as a focal point, or umbrella organization, for a worldwide terrorist network that includes many Sunni Islamic extremist groups such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad, some members of al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Harakat ul-Mujahidin.” Governemnt of Canada, Office of critical infrastructure protection and emergency preparadness [http://www.ociepc-bpiepc.gc.ca/opsprods/other/TA01-001\\_E.asp](http://www.ociepc-bpiepc.gc.ca/opsprods/other/TA01-001_E.asp)

driven by a host of nationalist and separatist causes rather than by a purely religious and global one.

Al Qaida is a small, tightly knit organization of about 300 hardened jihadis, or holy warriors, created as a role model, rallying point and ideological beacon for militant Islamic resistance movements around the globe. (...) A small number of al-Qaida-run paramilitary camps in Afghanistan served as a training ground and social center for thousands of young Muslim men from many nations who came to fight for the Taliban or in a variety of jihads, or holy struggles, against what they viewed as oppression. All these groups were branded "al-Qaida terrorists" by U.S. government and media, though they were not part of al-Qaida and had nothing to do with the 9/11 outrages. The largest group was some 5,000 jihadis being trained by Pakistani intelligence for combat in the Indian-ruled portion of Kashmir, and a similar number of volunteers who had joined the Taliban to fight the Northern Alliance, which was the old Afghan Communist party under a new name. There were 3,000 Uzbek fighters battling to overthrow Uzbekistan's brutal, communist dictatorship, and smaller numbers of jihadis from Indonesia, the Philippines, Muslim western China, North Africa, Bangladesh and other Islamic nations. (...) While there is no formal linkage between al-Qaida and militant Islamic groups in Asia and Africa, an old-boys' network of war veterans allows for secure and effective communication, as well as occasional co-operation. In reality, the U.S. now faces scores of violent anti-American groups from Morocco to Indonesia, inspired by Osama bin Laden's defiance, and enraged by the suffering of the Palestinians and Iraqis (The Toronto Sun, October 20, 2002).

A unified idea of this allegedly global enemy is not just wrong but perversely creative in ways likely to make the fight against terrorism harder. It fosters the near-automatic interpretation of any terrorist actions as the fruit of the same tree. Just as in Sicily every murder used to be automatically attributed to the mafia now every terrorist act is attributed to Al Qaeda. Washington, the media and several writers of things terroristic, have blamed Al Qaeda for many attacks. Even in the face of uncertain evidence of authorship, Bin Laden has been seen "behind" the attacks on a French tanker, the killing of a U.S. Marine in Kuwait, the bombing of the Bali discotheque, the bombing of an Israeli tourist resort in Kenya and an attempt to down a plane there on the same day; and, more recently, a series of bombings in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Pakistan, India and others.<sup>23</sup> As Margolis points out, "Bin Laden and al-Qaida reinforce this erroneous view by applauding every anti-western attack, no matter how heinous or ineffective."

The latest case at the time of writing is the bomb at the Giakarta Marriott Hotel on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2003. The White House hurried to condemn and attribute it to Al Qaeda as did most of the press. But looked at more closely by experts of the Indonesian situation the identity of the culprits is far from certain. There have been a string of bombings in the past often associated with trials against military personnel or politicians involved in the now defunct thirty-year long military dictatorship. The recent bomb too came only hours before the verdict against 18 people, including three high-ranking officers, accused of slaughtering a thousand Christians, who were found not guilty or received very lenient sentences, to the outrage of human rights groups (La Repubblica, August 6, 2003).

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<sup>23</sup> See Rohan Gunaratna 2002, *Inside Al Qaeda*, New York: Berkley Books, Preface to the new edition.

Once again, the beliefs about the nature and identity of the enemy strike me as not so rationally founded. One can search for a rationale – for instance claim that that view of the enemy is peddled publicly to give a simplified focus to the fight, rally the troops as it were. Yet, there is a different explanation. When someone who sees himself as strong and safe is suddenly hit by an attack of the scale of 9/11 the cognitive dissonance becomes strident. One way to reduce it consists in attributing evil but *special powers* to the culprits. Only a big nasty monster can do this to us.

Such a powerful image of the enemy has insidious consequences for it affects the image the enemies have of themselves. We are right in the middle of the inscrutable case where there is not a stable and knowable truth out there. Given the lack of easy communication among the cells and the various groups of terrorists, they themselves try to find out what the situation is by reading the press and watching the media, and are meaningfully informed by them. So that view may well encourage the reality it claims to reflect by giving new courage and determination to local groups, making them feel stronger, and more important than they thought they were. Local conflicts are raised to the level of a global one, and every terrorist group benefits from being seen as part of the network even if it is not or not yet, and from every terrorist act regardless of whether they had any part in it. Once the brand ‘Al Qaeda’ is firmly etched, it does the work for others and others can do the work for it.

The force of the brand is conveyed to an extreme degree by the fact that terrorist groups hitherto utterly unrelated to the cause of Bin Laden are joining in, there is what we may call a “*brand-wagon effect*”. A member of the Italian Red Brigades, Nadia Desdemona Lioce, recently arrested for the murder of a train guard in Tuscany, released a document from prison in which she praises the Twin Towers attack and claims that “the Arab and Islamic masses are the natural ally of the metropolitan proletariat”, and issues a call to arms to a self-styled “Fronte Combattente Antimperialista” (Il Sole 24 Ore, April 2, 2003).<sup>24</sup> If one is in the business of maximizing the spreading of terror, it is worth bending even one’s political agenda to fit the powerful brand. “Didn’t you know, my cause is *your* cause”. Any ordinary terrorist act that could be treated as a local event to be dealt with by vigorous policing and local forces thus becomes far more effective in striking fear if the perpetrators are seen as part of a worldwide conspiracy. A cigarette lighter in the hands of someone believed to be a member of Al Qaeda can now send the stock exchange tumbling down. Anyone who explodes a bomb anywhere in the world now is seen, and can thus see himself and take pride in that, as an enemy of the US.

“Unite and rule” is by all accounts not an effective fighting strategy, and yet it is exactly what follows from the US view of the identity of the enemy. This is one of those cases in which, even if it were true it would be better not to say it too loud. Much better to be prudent, stick to the known facts, avoid speculation in attributing this or that act to a given agency, and treat each episode separately as a potentially local affair.

I fear it may already be too late and that we are going to live with this threat for many decades. While “[i]n many ways America's obsession with terrorism since September 11

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<sup>24</sup> The lure of the name can even be attractive to delinquents out to impress. A deranged young man, who took 12 students hostages, before being shot dead by police in Dyersburg, Tenn., was “Identified as Harold Kilpatrick Jr., 26. (...) The gunman said he was a member of Al Qaeda, and Chief Williamson said the F.B.I. had been called in. The chief and Justice Department officials in Washington said they had no evidence that the gunman was a member of the terrorist organization”. (The New York Times September 17, 2003.)

is an echo of its obsession with communism fifty years ago”<sup>25</sup>, the fall of terrorism is not as easily observable as that of communism. How can one be sure that a secret organisation has disappeared? If God died how would we know? No one has enough universal credibility to stand up and proclaim convincingly that the mafia is gone forever. Insofar as people expect it to be there, scores of new entrants will be clamouring to capture the brand and become the owners of it. Once a brand acquires power over the imagination by becoming a focal source of a class of actions, actors with any agenda will group under its wings till it becomes extremely hard to make the brand disappear. The obsession will persist in so far as anyone puts a bomb somewhere in the world and claims to be Al Qaeda.

## II

### The terrorist threat dilemma

It cannot of course be denied that a terrorist threat exists. But how serious it is, is unclear. Given the huge political cost if an attack of the scale of 9/11 were to be repeated it seems to make sense for policy makers to err on the side of prudence, and work on a worse case basis or at least be seen as doing that. Before a terror event of 9/11 magnitude there is an interest in playing the threat down – one does not want to be seen as a paranoid Cassandra, upsetting citizens and depressing the economy. But 9/11 caused a seismic change. Even without interpreting the strategy as a plot for power increase, governments can get more support by playing the threat up, at least not underplaying it. If nothing bad happens it will be seen as thanks to their policing efforts, if something bad happens they cannot be accused of not having done all they could, including informing the public of the fact that they knew of the threat. Politically, they just cannot afford to take chances. (This goes on until nothing happens for long enough – hard to predict how long – to make any warnings ring hollow and unduly alarmist, at which point the situation reverts to the tranquil equilibrium.)

Still, while underestimation of the threat is bad, over-estimation is not good either, and in ways which are harder to perceive.

When contemplating unknown unknowns the imagination can go wild and start making up worst case scenarios.

A smallpox epidemic is so vicious and kills so many people so rapidly and spreads far and wide, that, after a great deal of thought, I concluded that the U.S. military people who have ... potential vulnerability ought to (be vaccinated)” Rumsfeld said. The secretary also indicated he would receive the vaccine. “It's hard to ask people to do something you're not willing to do yourself,” he said. In announcing the vaccination program Dec. 13, Bush said he'd receive the vaccine as well.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> H.D.S.Greenway, NYRB 25<sup>th</sup> September 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Armed Forces information service [www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2002/n12192002\\_200212192.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2002/n12192002_200212192.html)

No one has any idea of whether there is someone out there able to spread a smallpox epidemic. ("A team of US government scientists has turned up no evidence that Saddam Hussein was making or stockpiling smallpox. "Team Pox", a six-member group hunting for laboratories manufacturing the deadly virus, found nothing more sinister than equipment covered in cobwebs, and nothing to suggest a smallpox programme, according to military officials involved in the project, who leaked the information to the Associated Press. (...) In the run-up to the conflict, George Bush regularly used the smallpox example to drive home the immediacy of Iraq's threat to ordinary Americans". The Guardian, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003.) Still, if the cost of prevention is not too high it is better to be safe than sorry.

Other threats that people have been made to worry about, however, seem to belong to the realm of the implausible, at least in the manner in which they were aired. In a letter to the Financial Times, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, former head of the joint intelligence committee in 1992-93, wrote that "the real overselling were the continual assessments of an imminent terrorist attack in London, advising housewives to lay in stocks of water and food, I mean all that stuff ... tanks at Heathrow. I mean that, I call that overselling" (The Guardian, July 11, 2003). The threat posed by cyber-terrorism too

has been overhyped and the net is unlikely to become a launch pad for terror attacks. That was the conclusion of a panel of security and technology experts brought together at the CeBIT technology fair to consider the threat posed by net attacks on businesses and consumers. Panel members said companies faced far more serious threats from ordinary criminals, fraudsters and pranksters than they did from technology-literate terrorists. Respected security expert Bruce Schneier said the threat posed by so-called cyber-terrorism had been over-estimated. "If they want to attack they will do it with bombs like they always have," he said. By contrast, he said, disrupting the running of the net and other communications networks would cause more annoyance than fear. "Breaking pager networks and stopping e-mail is not an act of terror," he said. If I cannot get my e-mail for a day I am not terrorised. "*The hype is coming from the US Government and I don't know why,*" he said. Fellow panel member Art Coviello, head of security firm RSA, said some of the warnings about cyber-terrorism had come about in reaction to the attacks on 11 September. But, he added, sections of the media were also responsible for hyping the threat. "Some of these stories are very entertaining and sell a lot of newspapers," he said. "Some media organisations are fanning the flames of this."<sup>27</sup>

The ultimate form of imagining new threats is epitomised by the CIA Teams which were "sent to pick the brains of Hollywood scriptwriters who dream up far-fetched terror spectacles. When the analysts return to Langley, they comb their databases to see if Al-Qaeda has the capability to carry out such attacks" (Time Magazine, July 8, 2002). "US intelligence failed to stop September 11 because it failed to match al-Qaida's imagination. American spies did not see airliners as potential missiles. The *CLA vowed not to repeat the mistake and even asked Hollywood scriptwriters to dream up spectacular plots*, aware that al-Qaida has historically tried to make each of its major attacks more deadly than the last" (The Guardian, September 5, 2002, my emphasis).

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<sup>27</sup> Cyber terrorism 'overhyped', by Mark Ward, BBC News Online Friday, March 14, 2003.

Still, not all imagined threats are necessarily fantasies. Eliza Manningham-Buller, the head of MI5, in her first public speech since taking up her post in October 2002, said intelligence reports suggest that “renegade scientists” have given terrorist groups the information they need to create unconventional weapons and they have the ambition to use them. “My conclusion, based on the intelligence we have received, is that we are faced with a realistic possibility of some form of unconventional attack that could include chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack,” she told a conference on counter-terrorism (The Daily Telegraph, June 18, 2003). She also added however: “before we become unduly alarmist, it is worth noting that the bomb and the suicide bomber remain the most effective tool in the terrorist arsenal” (The Daily Telegraph, June 18, 2003).

There are to be sure reasons not to become alarmist. In terms of scale 9/11 is a wild outlier with respect to the *past* distribution not just of terrorist acts generally but also of the other actions attributed to Al Qaeda. The latter are on a comparable scale to the early suicide missions in Lebanon (1982-3) – they are very serious indeed but still relying on ‘normal’ terrorist means. Furthermore, one is justified in thinking that there are not many terrorists around with Mohamed Atta’s traits – highly skilled, methodically bent on causing devastation, and ready to die. A repeat of 9/11 may not be so likely for the perpetrators themselves may be outliers in the spectrum of dangerous individuals and seem to have been extremely lucky not to have been detected in time.

The evidence from failed attacks too, while showing considerable imagination to resort to unconventional weapons, indicates that the terrorists use low quality technology and exploit deranged individuals, nothing like Atta. There was Richard Reid, the British man with a troubled past who tried to blow up a plane by exploding his shoes. There was the failed attempt to down an Israeli civilian plane in Kenya, where the perpetrators used an old malfunctioning rocket launcher of Soviet make. There were four Moroccan men arrested in Rome with a map of the aqueduct and 4 kilos of “potassium ferrocyanide”, described by experts as a pretty harmless substance when distributed through water. The substance is known as a diuretic and in high doses as a laxative, used in agriculture, the wine industry and as a food additive (La Stampa, February 21, 2002). There were five Algerian men arrested in a modest London flat while trying to produce ricin, a very poisonous substance extracted from castor oil for which there is no antidote. Tony Blair said the find showed that “this danger is present and real and with us now – and its potential is huge” (The Daily Telegraph, January 8, 2003). But the quantities found were tiny, and even though the extraction process is not too difficult it requires a lot more than a young chemist set which is all these men apparently had.<sup>28</sup>

#### Authorities arrested

an Ohio truck driver who was plotting with leaders of al Qaida abroad to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge. Iyman Faris, a naturalized American citizen from Columbus, Ohio, pleaded guilty in closed proceedings last month to charges he provided support to terrorists. (...) The alleged plan — to use blowtorches to cut the suspension cables of the bridge — seems highly improbable, given both the structure of the 120-year-old span and the police scrutiny it has received since Sept. 11, 2001. It's a reminder of why American authorities in the 1990's found it

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<sup>28</sup> A ricin scare occurred also in France: “Officials said yesterday that a stash of powder initially believed be the deadly toxin ricin when it was found in the Gare du Lyon railway station in Paris on 17 March had been analysed by the Defence Ministry and appeared to be a harmless mixture of ground barley and wheatgerm” (*The Independent*, April 12, 2003).

hard to take terrorist plots seriously, even after a number had been uncovered — *it all just seemed pathetically amateurish and unthreatening* (The New York Times 21 6 2003).

Yet, as the same article concludes, “*now we know what 19 men with box cutters can do, so we can't dismiss a truck driver with a blowtorch*”. The dilemma regarding the real level of the threat — are we facing a bunch of smart dilettantes who got lucky once on 9/11 or are we really up to something awful — is a real one and plagues the investigations.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed looked more like a loser in a T shirt than a modern-day Mephistopheles. But “KSM,” as he is always referred to in FBI documents, held the key to unlock the biggest mystery of the war on terror: is al Qaida operating inside America? (...) The cooperating witnesses have “given us a few leads” about “where to look,” said one official, but, as yet, no major finds. That may be because al Qaida, like all successful terrorist organizations, is carefully “compartmented.” Different cells are kept apart. Some top investigators have a nagging suspicion that KSM just fed his interrogators the small fry to divert investigators from the really big—and deadly—plots. “*The problem is,*” said the senior official, “*we don't know what we don't know*” (Newsweek, Friday, June 20, 2003).

The depth of the dilemma is such that, in the current climate of uncertainty, even consulting scriptwriters is not so obviously an act of fanciful paranoia: “the CIA has found evidence in seized Al Qaeda documents that Bin Laden's operatives watch action-adventure movies for ideas” (Time Magazine, July 8, 2002). Can this lead to more than just gruesome daydreaming about inflicting devastation? Can they get lucky once again?

The trouble is that there is an asymmetry between preys and predators, which underlies the dilemma: a predator's mistake is ‘a missed dinner’ while a prey's mistake can be fatal. A predator needs to get it right only some of the times, while a prey is under pressure to get it right all the times. An awareness of the advantage this asymmetry gives to terrorists is reflected in an IRA statement after they unsuccessfully tried to assassinate Margaret Thatcher in 1984 when she was Prime Minister: “We just need to be lucky once, she needs to be lucky every time.”<sup>29</sup>

How is the dilemma to be solved? “We will — in the words of the document on National Security Strategy” — build better, more integrated intelligence capabilities to provide timely, accurate information on threats, wherever they may emerge.” Easier said than done, as I try to explain below.

### **The effects of 9/11 on intelligence gathering**

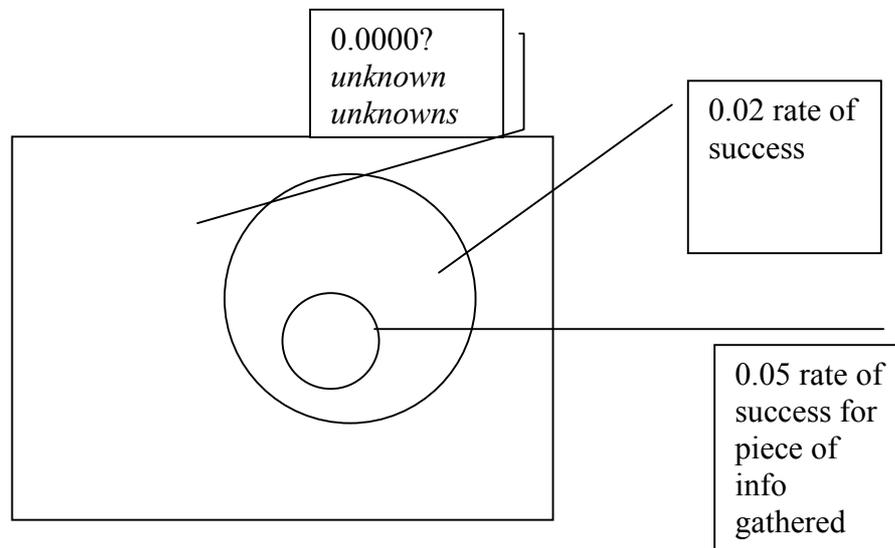
What happens when the demand for intelligence information increases so dramatically as it did after 9/11? A lot of good things, of course: real terrorists have been caught, and real plots foiled. Yet, there is a lot can go wrong too, and to such an extent that independent thinking cannot abdicate its role to intelligence. I am not referring so much to the political pressures to find out the ‘right’ evidence which have been very widely reported — much complaining in this regard has filtered out of the intelligence communities on both sides of the Atlantic. These pressures certainly do not contribute to truth transmission. “The president is a very powerful guy,” said Ray Close, who spent 26

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<sup>29</sup> On October 12, 1984 the IRA exploded a bomb in the Grand Hotel, Brighton where the Conservative Party were holding their annual conference. Five people were killed, but Margaret Thatcher was uninjured.

years in the C.I.A. "When you sense what he wants, it's very difficult not to go out and find it" (The New York Times, June 6, 2003). Nor am I referring to the often-mentioned conspiratorial idea that the secret services hype threats up to strengthen their role and justify the granting of more funding. Once again, I want to examine the problem assuming that the consumers are open to listen and the producers are well intentioned.

**Figure 1. Fields of intelligence searches**



A description of what happens might be as follows. One can imagine a chart of concentric sets<sup>30</sup> and think of them as geographical areas in which to search for leads, or as additional groups within which to gather intelligence, or as increasingly less reliable informers one pays attention to, or as any other meaningful searching unit one wishes. The pressure is to search within larger units, checking more and more people and more and more leads whatever their *prima facie* value.

As a result we get more information, and we may even get more *useful* information overall, but the rate of information usefulness over the total number of pieces of information pursued decreases the larger the set. Thus, even if resources are increased proportionally to the searched areas, the overall average quality of information acquired decreases as we search in wider and less fertile terrain. (If intelligence resources do not grow sufficiently there will of course be even more serious problems, and it should be stressed that "operationalizing worst-case analysis requires extraordinary expense."<sup>31</sup>)

The amount of information that needs to be analysed grows and greater pressure is put on filtering out the irrelevant or unreliable information. After the Sept. 11 attacks "came a scramble to find any remaining terrorists, and President Bush put out a nationwide call for eyes and ears to be alert" (The New York Times, June 19, 2003). Encouraging tips from the public epitomises the problem of widening the searching areas. The FBI has received lots of tips from the public, but many have proven not just useless but false, driven by greed, megalomania or desire for revenge, as was recently documented by the

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Ernesto Dal Bo' for suggesting this way of representing the problem.

<sup>31</sup> Richard K. Betts, 1978, "Analysis, war and decision: why intelligence failures are inevitable", *World Politics*, 31, 1, 61-89, p.74.

New York Times.<sup>32</sup> Most of the times<sup>33</sup> these false tips and the following investigations come at the expense of innocent people. Searching further afield implies that an increasing proportion of people risk the infringements of their civil liberties.<sup>34</sup>

One can generalise and claim that the more intense the demand for information the greater the incentive to supply more of it, both for good and bad sources. The question everyone asked about the Niger case is how is it possible that such badly forged documents could reach the top. But an equally pressing question is who bothered to forge them in the first place. The amateurish nature of the forgery suggests that the forgers did not have better means or larger funds to carry it out. It was not a sophisticated disinformation job and this makes greed a plausible motive. Under pressure agents will buy anything, in both meanings of the phrase, and people will try to sell them anything.

Terrorist groups themselves can use this situation to their advantage using misinformation strategically to choke and confuse the intelligence services. A Middle-eastern accent and a disposable mobile phone can cause a lot of damage by giving phoney warnings.

this intelligence issue raises the associated one of disinformation (a branch on its own right in most clandestine organizations). What those who do not want to be found do? Among other things, they surely call and make fake denunciations to clog the system and confuse potentially true leads. This is another unfortunate

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<sup>32</sup> "Federal agents, facing intense pressure to avoid another terrorist attack, have acted on information from tipsters with questionable backgrounds and motives, touching off needless scares and upending the lives of innocent suspects. (...) In Michigan, Mohamed Alajji, a trucker born in Yemen, was jailed for seven days last December before agents interviewed his accuser, who turned out to be making false claims against him to press a family feud. (...) In Texas, Eshassah Fouad, a student from Morocco, was detained after his former wife accused him of plotting terrorism. (...) The federal and state authorities in Detroit exhaustively investigated accusations by a tipster, Gussan Abraham Jarrar, against seven United States citizens, who he said had formed a terrorist gang called "Whatever It Takes." All of the accusations proved false, and Mr. Jarrar, who had a long record of previous arrests, eventually pleaded guilty to providing false information. (...). The federal authorities say that Hoda Elsaidy, an Egyptian living in California, told them last summer that her husband was plotting to bomb the federal government's Defense Language Institute in Monterey, and that one terrorist cell member had already been paid \$90,000 by overseas conspirators. An F.B.I. agent, according to court records, said the bureau, in turn, promised to help Mrs. Elsaidy resolve a lapsed resident's visa. But after investigating, the authorities concluded that she had made up the story, and she has been charged with providing false information" (The New York Times, June 19, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> "Sometimes only the F.B.I gets hurt. John Habenstein, a New Jersey man who presented himself as an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, sent agents scurrying on a sweeping and time-consuming search of a ship for weapons of mass destruction. He later admitted that he had lied in order to promote himself as terrorism expert for hire" (The New York Times, June 19, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> "The case of Mr. Alajji, the Michigan trucker, illustrates the limbo into which terrorist suspects can be thrust. When investigators got a tip last December that he was plotting a bomb attack, F.B.I. agents tracked him down, searched his rig and interviewed friends and associates. The United States attorney in Detroit had him charged with Social Security fraud, using the tip and other information from the agents to argue that he should be held without bail. But one thing investigators had not done was talk to the tipster, who named Mr. Alajji using a hot line for terrorist tips. When agents did so nine days later — pressed by a skeptical judge — the bombing plot went up in smoke. "He recanted," said Eric M. Straus, the assistant United States attorney who handled the case. Mr. Alajji had divorced the tipster's sister, and she was fighting to regain custody of their children, according to people on both sides of the family feud. (...) As for the swift jailing, Mr. Straus said he and other prosecutors simply had no choice, given the magnitude of the threat. "With terrorism you do not have the luxury of sometimes waiting to figure out if the guy is truly a terrorist" (The New York Times, June 19, 2003).

way in which demand creates its own supply, to reverse J.B.Say's principle” (Ernesto Dal Bo’, personal communication)

One can surmise that there is a little theorem waiting to be formalised: as the demand for information grows bad quality information supplied will grow proportionally more than good quality one. There is an asymmetry: to produce a good piece of information cost as much as before and one gains more, but low quality fabrications that would once have been rejected out of hand now get attention and one can more cheaply produce them *and* get better results.

#### *Congestion and Filtering*

In principle, even if the quantity of information amassed by an intelligence service increases and its average quality decreases, if the quality of the filtering analysis remains constant, the average quality of the output passed on to policy makers should also stay the same. However, increasing the analysis and the filtering capacity is not as easily achieved as increasing the amount of information. Even if one throws in a lot of funds the necessary skills cannot be created quickly – how many people are fluent in Arabic *and* both willing and reliable to work for the intelligence services? The head of MI5, Ms Eliza Manningham-Buller, said to the British parliamentary committee that one problem they have in assessing the nature of the threat was “the incomplete nature and the sheer volume of the information that was picked up by MI5 and other agencies. She said that *about 150 new pieces of intelligence about possible terrorist threats were received at the joint terrorism analysis centre at MI5's London headquarters every week*” (The Daily Telegraph, June 18, 2003, my emphasis.)

*With thousands of tips coming in every week*, the F.B.I. was hard pressed in those early days merely to take in the information, officials said, especially since Justice Department orders were that no plausible tip was to be ignored.(...) At one time, when information came to us, a lot of times based on experience the investigator would say, ‘Nah, this is not something we will follow through on,’ ” said Bill Carter, an F.B.I. spokesman in Washington. But after the Sept. 11 attacks, he said, “The director has stated that no counterterrorism lead will go uncovered” (The New York Times, June 19, 2003).

The head of MI5 hints not only at *congestion*, just too much is gathered to be properly followed on and analysed, but also to *incompleteness*, which is one way to say that a lot of the information received is of low quality. One can inform that an attack is in preparation, but if one does not say where and when, it is just like predicting that sooner or later is going to rain, true but useless.

If we focus on the micro-management of intelligence and on what happens to it under pressure, it becomes apparent that there is a lot more that can go wrong.

#### *Fear of mistakes*

The fear of making mistakes must be enormous among intelligence agents and analysts after they failed to detect 9/11. This fear can have perverse effects. Suppose I tell you something wrong in good faith. You go ahead and act on that sticking your neck out. Then someone comes and tells me that I was wrong, what do I do? Am I going to like the messenger? Am I going to risk my career to subvert what I said to you in the past? An anonymous source told me the following episode:

An American academic specializing in Islamic legal systems whose family origins and research experience are in a country with Islamic terrorist links was asked by the CIA in the fall of 2002 to assist them with whatever information he had. He went to a meeting with five officials who work on that country. On the wall there was a map of the country with tribal names written on it. He noticed that there were several major mistakes and that some of the tribal names were wrongly positioned on the map. He pointed that out. The officials were taken aback as they had been passing on information based on that map, and were not amused. He was never asked for assistance again, even though MI6 does maintain regular contacts with him.

Self-serving selection of the sources may occur in normal times, but pressure must make matters worse.

Another thing which agents do to minimise mistakes consists in reducing analysis and passing unprocessed information up to the next level. The failure to pass *any* piece of information on to the next level up becomes more feared by agents than passing on the wrong piece. They pass on more, and more of what they pass on is under-analysed.<sup>35</sup> Let the guys above worry about this. This simply pushes the congestion up the ladder. And the higher the level reached the busier the people are, (and also the closer they are to having a political agenda). While the lower levels may have no interest in sticking their necks out to vet something of vague potential interest, the higher levels may have an interest in selective interpretation.

What went wrong [in the Niger case]? Did a poorly conceived propaganda effort by British intelligence, whose practices had been known for years to senior American officials, manage to move, without significant challenge, through the top layers of the American intelligence community and into the most sacrosanct of Presidential briefings? Who permitted it to go into the President's State of the Union speech? Was the message—the threat posed by Iraq—more important than the integrity of the intelligence-vetting process? Was the Administration lying to itself? Or did it deliberately give Congress and the public what it knew to be bad information?<sup>36</sup>

There may be a lot of murky sides to this story, but the simplest explanation is that no one bothered to challenge the forgery, not forcefully enough at least, till it found someone ready to think that it was too good to be false.

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<sup>35</sup> "In the late summer of 2002, Graham had requested from Tenet an analysis of the Iraqi threat. According to knowledgeable sources, he received a 25-page classified response reflecting the balanced view that had prevailed earlier among the intelligence agencies--noting, for example, that evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program or a link to Al Qaeda was inconclusive. Early that September, the committee also received the DIA's classified analysis, which reflected the same cautious assessments. But committee members became worried when, midway through the month, they received a new CIA analysis of the threat that highlighted the Bush administration's claims and consigned skepticism to footnotes. According to one congressional staffer who read the document, it highlighted 'extensive Iraqi chem-bio programs and nuclear programs and links to terrorism' but then included a footnote that read, 'This information comes from a source known to fabricate in the past.' The staffer concluded that *'they didn't do analysis. What they did was they just amassed everything they could that said anything bad about Iraq and put it into a document'* (The First Casualty, by John B. Judis & Spencer Ackerman, The New Republic, June 30, 2003, my emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, Why did the Administration endorse a forgery about Iraq's nuclear program? New Yorker Issue, March 31, 2003.

*Secrecy vs coordination*

A way in which bad quality information can filter in the system is due to a structural problem for intelligence services. The handlers will always find it hard to decide whether an informer who reports nothing is simply not observing anything important or is a loafer (or a double agent). Silence is, in the economist jargon, a pooling equilibrium, that is a piece of information that does not help one to discriminate what is true from what is not. The response to this problem is no less worrying. The fear of that interpretation puts informers under pressure to pass on at least something. This creates a bias, which, as I was told by a knowledgeable British source, consists in omitting the dogs that did not bark from field reports. When pressure increases, informers will be under even more pressure to come up with at least something interesting.

Agents will also take more risks to come up with something. Consider the following episode, which occurred to Nicholas D. Kristof:

My own limited encounters with spies reinforce the idea that intelligence needs to be digested by professionals rather than cherry-picked by ideologues. I remember one spy who would call me up periodically for lunch when I lived in China. He would pass on amazing inside tidbits about China's top leaders — and then ask for copies of classified Chinese documents I had obtained. I kept putting him off because I wasn't going to share my documents — but I did want his scoops. Unfortunately, I could never confirm them, so they were unusable. *Finally, it dawned on me that he was simply fabricating juicy tidbits so he would have something to trade.* That's the way the intelligence game sometimes operates: the information is voluminous, confusing and contradictory, and prone to abuse, and it needs to be protected from policy makers rather than massaged to make them feel good (The New York Times, June 6, 2003, my emphasis).

The above occurred in peace times. Now that the war on terror is on, shouldn't we expect more of that to occur? The consequences, at least in theory, can create a perfect mechanism for producing and spreading untruths.

Suppose there is another kind of congestion in the search areas, not one of pieces of information but one of spies from different agencies looking for it, a most plausible result of 9/11. Each agency uses more agents, and more agencies from many countries in the world go into high gear. Despite everyone best efforts there is a problem of coordination for one agency cannot reveal details of their agents to another agency lightly because of fear of exposing them and sometimes because agencies compete among themselves.

Suppose further that a journalist like Krystof (J) is approached by two spies, S1 and S2. Each does not know about the other and each uses the same fishing technique of giving false informations (f) as a bait to get good information back from J. S1 will pass on f1 to J and S2 will pass on f2 also to J. At this point, a less professional and adroit J than Krystof is, may reciprocate. He can then pass f1 to S2 and f2 to S1. This terse geometric transaction will leave each spy chewing on the phoney bone that the other spy passed on to the journalist.

*The perils of infiltration*

Infiltration of an enemy group can be surely a most rewarding option for intelligence gathering, in both its forms – persuading a member to become an agent or succeeding in

passing an undercover agent off as a new recruit. Just two months before 9/11, Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA operative, raised serious doubts over the real feasibility of infiltrating Islamic movements.<sup>37</sup>

Even a Muslim CIA officer with native-language abilities (and the Agency, according to several active-duty case officers, has very few operatives from Middle Eastern backgrounds) could do little more in this environment than a blond, blue-eyed all-American. Case officers cannot long escape the embassies and consulates in which they serve. A U.S. official overseas, photographed and registered with the local intelligence and security services, can't travel much, particularly in a police-rich country like Pakistan, without the "host" services knowing about it. An officer who tries to go native, pretending to be a true-believing radical Muslim searching for brothers in the cause, will make a fool of himself quickly.

Yet, the pressure to try must be tremendous now. Rohan Gunaratna, the author of *Inside Al Qaeda*, said:<sup>38</sup>

For a Western intelligence agency to penetrate an Islamist organization is very difficult. Although a determined intelligence organization can infiltrate an Islamist organization. Take the example of Hezbollah. After the marine barracks bombing in 1983 it took five years to infiltrate Hezbollah. The U.S. should infiltrate by recruiting members already in al Qaida or by finding those who would join and the U.S. should run them as agents. You cannot develop them in the short term. (...) Within a one to two year period we could begin the process of infiltrating. You have to get to know their mindset and modus operandi. If you do not infiltrate, you will simply know their strategy but not what they are planning. You can't protect ten thousand targets. Without human intelligence information, you will not know what they are planning.

Assuming it is possible to succeed, infiltration is an exceedingly dangerous affair, not just for the agents but for what it may end up yielding.

Undercover agents and informers to stay safe need to establish their credibility in the eyes of the host group. One of the things they do for this purpose is to fake some of their credentials, but this is complicated and dangerous, especially if the screening is strict. They are very often tempted to cross the line and display ideas, and initiative of the same kind a genuine terrorist would display, even more extremely than a genuine terrorist. Even if they are only supposed to collect information they often end up producing it. They become agent provocateurs, not necessarily for the same reasons why Joseph Conrad's Secret Agent does – Verloc was in the pay of an unnamed foreign embassy which wanted to persuade the British to take a tougher line against anarchists – but even only out of fear of not being credible enough. The memoirs of undercover agents – for instance those of Donnie Brasco seven years in the New York mafia – invariably describe the dilemmas they face of how far to push their mimicry act.

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<sup>37</sup> “The Counterterrorist Myth”, The Atlantic Monthly, July/August 2001, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/07/gerecht.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Interviewed by Stephanie Walker and Sean Costigan Editor, on 27 June 2002. Columbia International Affairs Online carried it on 07/02.

A little known but illuminating episode of this problem occurred in Canada in the early 1990s. At its peak in 1993, The Heritage Front was the largest and best organized neo-Nazi group in Canada boasting a contact list of 1,800 names. Grant Bristow, co-founder and a leading member of the white racist Heritage Front, turned out to be a paid informant of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. “Bristow orchestrated a harassment campaign that terrorized Front enemies, harbored leading international racists in his own home in clear violation of both CSIS rules and the Immigration Act, and assisted in the Front's infiltration of the Reform Party” (The Toronto Sun, June 20, 1996.)

CSIS mole Grant Bristow, was an "agent provocateur" who, with his spymasters, broke Canadian laws and internal CSIS regulations, a group of MPs have concluded (...) Bristow's leadership role in the white racist Heritage Front, the report suggests, *may have led to the very events that caused CSIS to keep him in place for several more years* (The Toronto Sun October 20, 1995, my emphasis ).

An inquiry by the Security Intelligence Review Committee into the affair played down the accusations, but it is clear from the report that there were serious breaches. For instance, on the issue of harassment of anti-racists militants and Jewish community members, the document concludes that “any informant who enters the Heritage Front or a similar group has to maintain his credibility with his associates, otherwise he would not remain a trusted member for long. The question we were faced with was whether the CSIS source [Grant Bristow] had remained within the bounds of appropriate behaviour while trying to maintain his credibility. The answer we arrived at was that, ***in certain circumstances he had not***” (bold italics in the original).<sup>39</sup>

Not only do some undercover informants end up making the threats *look* more serious than they are, they actually *make* them higher by their own actions. And it gets worse.

#### *The Man who was Thursday*

The standard way in which undercover agents are protected is by keeping the operation so secret that only the handler knows about it in detail. Secrecy is of essence, but it is also the enemy of coordination, a problem that becomes all the more serious when the field of operation is congested with different agencies all pursuing the same task.

Suppose there is some flimsy evidence that in a certain place there is a group of people who are plotting to do bad things. An undercover agent is given the task of infiltrating this group and passes off by mimicking what he thinks this group of people are like and behave as he thinks they behave.

G.K.Chesterton gives us the fictional classic case of what may happen. In *The man who was Thursday* – who was written around the same time as Conrad's *The Secret Agent* when the anarchist threat loomed large over European countries (1908) – Syme is a policeman trying to infiltrate a group of anarchists by posing as one of them. He is eventually elected as one of the seven members of the Anarchist Council who take the name of the days of the week. Syme becomes Thursday. He meets the other seven members and slowly, in a hilarious crescendo, he finds out that all other six members are also policemen hidden under various disguises. They spy on each other only to discover that

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<sup>39</sup> Security Intelligence Review Committee, Annual Report 1994-5, p. 17. [http://www.sirc-csars.gc.ca/annual/pdf\\_files/94-95\\_e.pdf](http://www.sirc-csars.gc.ca/annual/pdf_files/94-95_e.pdf)

“There never was any Supreme Anarchist Council”. “We are a lot of silly policemen looking at each other” Syme concludes (p.156).

One may think that this is merely a theoretical possibility. (Even if it were, I should make no apologies for we badly do need theories about a world which is by definition shrouded in secrecy and too little accountable.) But it is not.

A real case happened during the campaign launched by Greenpeace against McDonald, which ended in a trial in 1997 in the U.K. In 1989 McDonald decided to take legal action against London Greenpeace. To do so the company needed to find out people's names and addresses, and they hired two investigative firms. Seven spies infiltrated the group. They followed people home, took letters sent to the group, got fully involved in the activities (including giving out anti-McDonald's leaflets). “At some London Greenpeace meetings there were as many spies as campaigners present and, as McDonald's didn't tell each agency about the other, the spies were busily spying on each other (the court later heard how Allan Claire, had noted the behaviour of Brian Bishop, another spy, as ‘suspicious’).”<sup>40</sup> The mimics ended up duping each other. One wonders how many cases of the sort are never detected or revealed.

There is a good analytical reason underlying this model. To succeed at passing off mimics must overcome a detection mechanism that works against them – people are better at spotting a mimic passing off as their sort rather than as different sort. It is easier to pretend to be a Mafioso with non-Mafiosi than with the real guys or a bogus doctor with patients than with colleagues. Mimics tend to be more successful in fooling other mimics than in fooling the genuine article. When a rumour of troubles starts and there is some profiling of the threatening individuals shared by more than one intelligence service it is entirely possible that several agents will try to infiltrate the group at the same time. If they meet each other, they may fail to realize they are agents, and think they found the real thing. They thus reinforce each other's belief in the existence of the group – which in the most extreme case may not exist at all – and plot together to establish their credibility in each other's eyes. Weak or non-existent threats may suddenly gain a reality of sort. Secrecy is an unavoidable security measure, but it is also the petard by which secret services may hoist themselves.

A case ripe for this perverse mechanism seems to be South America. Some evidence was found in Afghanistan about a possible Al Qaeda connection with a remote area known as the triple frontier where the borders of Paraguay, Brasil e Argentina meet. Leafing through the telephone agenda of Abu Zubaydah, one of Al Qaeda top man captured in Afghanistan, the CIA found the name of Mohammed Dahroug Dahroug, a business man of Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, which together with Foz de Iguazù (Brasil) e Puerto Iguazù (Argentina), makes up the tri-border area. As a result,

intelligence services and security forces from several Western Countries maintain the area under strict surveillance, sharing their daily lives with investigative journalists, mercenaries, academics, private intelligence and security companies, governmental officers both honest and corrupt, international terrorists, weapon, drug and people dealers, smugglers, prostitute' handlers and all kind of criminals ready to do anything for money.

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<sup>40</sup> Fran Tiller, one fo the spies, went native and eventually became a witness for the defence. Another spy (Michelle Hooker) had a 6-month love affair with one of the activists. The source of this story can be seen at [www.spanner.org/mclibel/interviews/tiller\\_fran.html](http://www.spanner.org/mclibel/interviews/tiller_fran.html), and at [www.mcspotlight.org/case/trial/story.html](http://www.mcspotlight.org/case/trial/story.html)

This vivid description of a situation worthy of Casablanca in 1942 is provided by a private intelligence and security firm, SIA,<sup>41</sup> founded in Israel and based in Argentina. The same source provides a list of the services present in the area: “in addition to the Americans and the three countries involved, Mossad, MI6 and also the Germans, the Italians, the French, the Chinese, the Russian and the Spanish” (La Repubblica, August 5, 2003). This colourful crowd of spooks is said not to cooperate among themselves – sometimes treading on each other’s toes, even spying on each other.

According to SIA the place is truly swarming with terrorists of all sorts: Hezbollah<sup>42</sup>, Hamas, Jamaa al Islamiya, Al Qaeda, Farc, Eln, Eta and the occasional visit from American neo-nazi. It is remote, it is easy to move from any of the three countries to another without much border control, and it is a very useful logistical base for trading and money laundering. There is no evidence that this multiple uncoordinated presence of secret agencies is hyping the threat by persuading one another that there is one. Still, SIA hints at this possibility by revealing that while the threat has diminished in 2002 relative to the previous years, partly because of the attention it has received from the intelligence agencies, “the international media coverage grew as well as the importance given to it by the region’s governments. This is indeed a paradox because the area was the focus for international terrorist activities in the past”<sup>43</sup>. And the area and its population are just the kind of broth in which untruths can be inadvertently cooked up to be then dished out as real.

### Conclusions

Even though the failure to prevent 9/11 and the dubious quality of the intelligence on Iraq has led many to distrust the competence and integrity of the intelligence services, on the whole 9/11 will strengthen their relevance, which was dwindling after end of the cold war. David Halberstam, in his book *War in a Time of Peace*, describes how President Clinton had no time for CIA briefings: “The world had changed, the CIA was less important, and often the stuff in the briefing papers had already been on CNN” (The Times, July 22, 2003). The ‘new’ terrorist threat has now led to a massive increase in the resources invested in intelligence agencies, and given them a new sense of purpose. Bruised and frantic they may be, but a new light shines over their prospects.

For the rest of us this is a mixed blessing. For while we want to be protected from that threat, we do not want that threat to be exaggerated unnecessarily.

That the spy will fabricate his information is mere commonplace – says the Assistant Commissioner to Sir Ethelred, the Home Office Minister in *The Secret Agent*. But in the sphere of political and revolutionary action, relying partly on violence, the professional spy has every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves, and will spread the double evil of emulation in one direction, and of

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<sup>41</sup> The paper from which this comes from is by SIA, 2003, “The triple border area: myth or threat?”, which can be obtained from [www.siacorp.com](http://www.siacorp.com). SIA - Security and Intelligence Advising – describes itself on its website as “an international organization specialized in security, intelligence and protection advising, founded in Israel and formed by a selected group of professionals with skills and expertise of the highest standards and proven track. SIA’s experts advise, plan and organize security, intelligence and protection programs for the most important private companies, institutions and governments worldwide”.

<sup>42</sup> See also Jeffrey Goldberg, “In the Party of God” (Part II), *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2002. Posted 2002-10-21.

<sup>43</sup> SIA, 2003, “The triple border area: myth or threat?”

panic, hasty legislation, unreflecting hate, in the other. However, this is an imperfect world (p.144).

Maybe we should not go as far as Conrad's level of cynicism, but as I explained above, even the well meaning spies can easily incur into unintended bumbles, which in times of pressure seem mostly to err on the side of exaggeration. Regardless of how intentionally created this bias is, it can spread "the double evil".

Now combine this tendency with the property of secret organisations, which once established become very hard to declare extinct. Then add a generous sprinkle of unknown-unknowns thinking. What we have are three forces pushing together to saddle us with the extra burden of a hyped terrorist threat for years to come. Seasoned politicians know very well that intelligence reports should not be trusted blindly. "In my early days", said the former foreign secretary, Lord Howe, while giving evidence to the Scott arms-to-Iraq inquiry in the UK (1996), "I was naive enough to get excited about intelligence reports. Many look, at first sight, to be important and interesting and significant and then when we check them they are not even straws in the wind. They are cornflakes in the wind". His successor, Lord Hurd, remarked: "There is nothing particularly truthful about a report simply because it is a secret one. People sometimes get excited because a report is secret and they think that therefore it has some particular validity. It is not always so in my experience" (The Guardian, June 28, 2003). Yet, in times of terror, that wisdom can be easily forgotten, and the consequences for civil liberties become extremely serious.

To have one's mind hijacked daily by the fear of terrorism is surely better than to be the victims of a real hijacking, but it is not fun. Not to be scared unduly, and dimming our lives as a result, is something that we should be worried about. We should also of course worry about the infringements to civil liberties that result from enlarging the areas of investigations and making them increasingly intrusive. We may be prepared to put up with some infringements, but we can do without those that come from an overestimation of the threat. "Traditionally, liberties could be overridden only in the case of a 'clear and present danger'. Now, it seems as if they can be overridden if the danger, although far from clear, is sufficiently large" (Jon Elster, private communication). And if we do not know what we do not know, anything can look large enough to merit the intrusion of the authorities and the trampling of liberty. In his talk on "The Patriot Act on campus"<sup>44</sup>, for instance, Jonathan Cole has shown with great clarity and richness of detail, to which worrying levels the policing of students, academics and research has now stooped.

Are we prepared to relinquish personal privacy and academic freedom to secure some vaguely articulated increase in national security? Do these new laws and regulations accomplish that? (...) What, in fact, is the threat to national security that is posed by students and faculty at our universities? What evidence is there that select agents and toxins used in American scientific laboratories for legitimate purposes pose a real threat to national security and require that we deny students access to that research opportunity because of where they were born? Are there students with links to terrorist organizations studying at our universities? What evidence is there to support such a claim and do the probabilities of a vague potential threat warrant the types of measures being taken to limit free inquiry, open communication, and individual privacy?

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<sup>44</sup> Published in the Boston Review, Summer 2003, <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.3/cole.html#1>

The perils that the terrorists pose to our lives and liberties lie as much in the terror and damage that they cause as in the political and military response that the Western governments have constructed. There has been an amazingly fast lowering of truth standards in many domains which cannot be accepted supinely. We should of course distrust politicians who lie and exaggerate the facts to suit their agenda and political perspective. But the questionable rationality of the mindset post 9/11 and of the overall strategic approach that that mindset has induced, pose a far more serious problem than that of spin. Perhaps, at present, we are not distrusting the most important things we should distrust.